

GREENING



BEN FENSKE 2023



Cover: Detail of Horseshoe Crab | 65 x 53 inches | Oil on linen | 2023

Inside Cover: Detail of Secret Beach, Shade | 39 x 55 inches | Oil on linen | 2021

BEN FENSKE



Scan to see Ben Fenske's most recent works.



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Over the last decade-and-a-half, Ben Fenske (b. 1980) has risen from emerging young painter to a top-selling artist. There's no question as to why. August 2023 marks his 16th annual Solo Show at Grenning Gallery, and we have never seen such a collection of thoroughly polished large-scale paintings from the now 45-year-old artist. This catalogue features the newest paintings plus the most notable works since 2020. Fenske's bright yet imposing, clever and expressive style has captivated passersby for years, often stopping them in their tracks. Many of these people quickly vote for Fenske with their dollars, becoming patrons on the spot. It's no wonder world-renowned art critic and social commentator Anthony Haden-Guest was drawn into the gallery on Fenske's opening night. Haden-Guest was interested enough to spend a day with Fenske, out painting in Sag Harbor and Shelter Island, to write about his new discovery.

Megan Toy | August 2023

Enough Chit-Chat

by Anthony Haden-Guest

Ben Fenske's paintings are at once classically composed and pulsing with life. His landscapes and seascapes are broadly brushy, and full of light, and his tablescapes are an inviting jumble, often including a bright element, such as a blue teapot or a green bottle. The female figures, clothed and unclothed, which are the subject of many canvases, and which is often that of the artist's muse, Amy, will be casual or self-involved rather than posey. There is often an immediacy to the work, a sense of time caught in the wing.

Fenske's subject matter is often traditional but it is tugged into the present day by his observant eye, as can be seen in this show by such touches as

the woman tickling a dog's tum in *Amy, Buddy*, the energetic bottle opener in *Kitchen*, the alertness of the woman holding an open book and looking out of the window in *Window*, and the woman languidly shielding her eyes while leaning against a car in *Golf* (and, yes, the car is a Golf). Fenske likes informative, unpretentious titles. His paint handling can create a level surface from edge to edge, as with the climatically energized landscape in *Wildflowers*, *Storm*, and the luminous seascape *Violet Horizon*, but in certain canvases particular passages grab your attention, such as the rotundity of the teapot, glimmery cheese knife handle and succulent chunk of meat in *Winter Table*.

So it's strong work but also remarkable work for quite other reasons. The *End of Art*, the book by the late critic Arthur Danto, is actually not about the end of art itself but of settled art history. Danto's argument is that there have been three art historical narratives, the first being Representation, which he concludes with Monet, and the second being Modernism, which ended for Danto when he confronted Warhol's Brillo Boxes, and perceived that the Warhols and the actual Brillo commodity were lookalikes. And the third narrative? That's right now, a period when the march of 'isms' is over, when anything goes in whatever direction the artist takes it.

Fenske's show endorses the Danto thesis. It has become the new normal for artists to combine figuration with elements of Modernism but Fenske, from his very beginnings, set himself on another course and the past painters he cites as having fed into his own development make it plain that he knew just what he was doing. They include Giacomo Favretto, a late 19th century Venetian painter of scenes and situations, and a little known group, the Soviet Impressionists of the 50s and 60s. He described Arkady Plastov, Alexandr Dejneka, and the brothers Sergei and Aleksei Tkachev as particularly strong talents, adding, "Americans don't know too much about them because of the Cold War." They were amongst the Socialist Realists who rose to prominence when Stalin crushed the Russian avant-garde of Kasimir Malevich and El Lissitzky.

Fenske just disregards the avant-garde. He makes his paintings in a cat's cradle of locations, including his house in Italy which is near Florence, and Sag Harbor, where we met. Unusually for an artist whose canvases can be large, he has no studio but makes all his work on location, trundling his canvases and materials back and forth by motorcar. This morning he was setting up at the edge of a beach in North Haven, across the bay from the Mashomuck Reserve on Shelter Island. "I call it Secret Beach. There's nobody here ever," he said.



Fenske and Haden-Guest at Secret Beach, August 2023

We toed and froed the edge of the beach for a while. "I'm trying to find the composition. I'll probably work here for just a few hours. Then I'll start another one

somewhere else” he said. A line of trees faced us across the water in the chosen spot, there were sailboats and a jetty to our right, a creek to the left. He seated himself, put the 44” by 30” canvas on an easel, picked up a brush in his left hand, clutched five other brushes in his right, observing “I’ll probably paint over the top of it tomorrow,” and settled down to work.

It was hypnotic to see fluid strokes of paint being swept at speed horizontally across the canvas and watch the tree line, the bay, the sky emerging both volumetrically and spatially as presences, while at the same time remaining wholly painterly. “When I’m painting it’s a representation,” Fenske would tell me. “But these shapes are also just abstract shapes.”

A couple of hours of painting followed, as did a climate change. “It’s becoming sunny now so I might pack up in a few minutes,” Fenske told me. It was a necessary break during which Fenske drove me back to his house, cut a raw canvas into two with a hand-held knife and impressive precision, and stapled them onto twin frames. We then did indeed take them on to somewhere else, Dering Harbor (on Shelter Island), which seemed somewhat beachier than the Secret Beach, being studded with granite boulders, blackened dry seaweed, empty shells and whitened crab carapaces.

Fenske eyed it, picked out an area that appealed for a new composition and settled one of the new canvases on the easel and cleaned his palette.

This being the launch pad of what is to be a productive period. “In the next two months within a mile radius I’ll paint a batch of paintings,” he told me. “I’ve been coming out here for fifteen years and I know the area now. It’s something I do every year”. He added “And I’ll start deciding what to make a bigger canvas.”

How much bigger?

“The biggest ones I have are about 110 to 150 centimeters. That’d be about 45 inches by 74,” he said. “I’ve got a couple that size.”

Enough chit-chat. Fenske got down to painting.



Secret Beach, Low Tide
39.5 x 55 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Roses Sunlight 2
28 x 47 inches | Oil on linen | 2022



Girl, Sunlight
47 x 67 inches | Oil on linen | 2022



Lilacs on the Table
27.5 x 29.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2022



Summer
43.5 x 63 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Twilight, Family
47 x 39.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2020



Still Life, Sunny Morning
43.3 x 59 inches | Oil on linen | 2022



Amy, Buddy
75 x 59 inches | Oil on linen | 2022



Sagaponack Waves
39.5 x 59 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



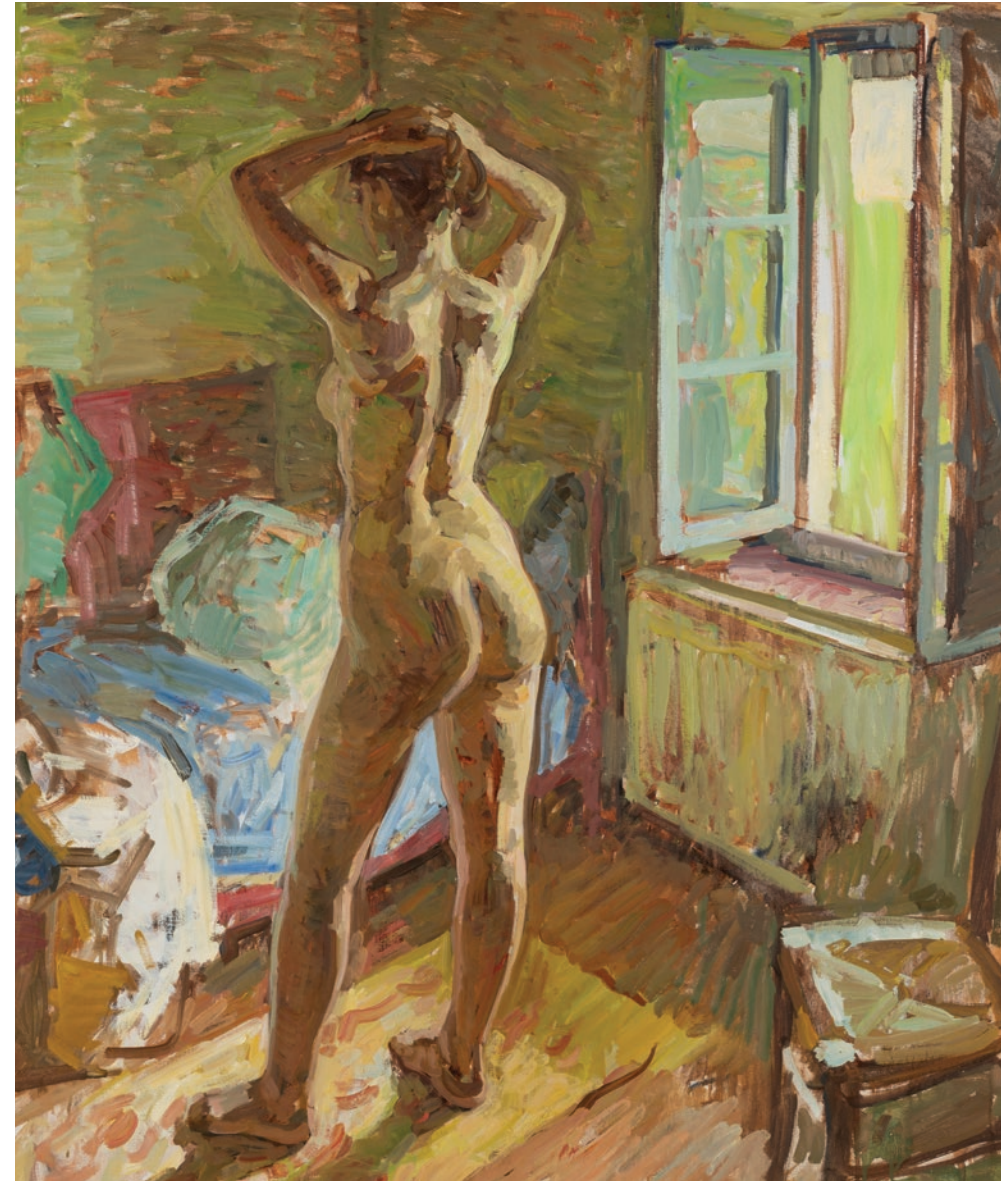
Road to the House
39.5 x 59 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



Winter Table
47.5 x 67 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Roses on a Chair
31.5 x 25.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



Nude, Window
47 x 39.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2022



Kitchen
47 x 63 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Winter Still Life
27.5 x 35.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2020



Peter's Pond, September
31.5 x 47 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Spring, Wildflowers
35.5 x 29.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Boats Moored at Secret Beach
35 x 43 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Sunflowers
35.5 x 27.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Window
43 x 35.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Andrà Tutto Bene | 47 x 67 inches | Oil on linen | 2020



Ball Jar Flowers
27.5 x 21.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2017



Horseshoe Crab
65 x 53 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Poppies and Daisies
21 x 25.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2020



Sag Harbor from Secret Beach
31.5 x 47 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Soft Yellow Sunset
25 x 35 inches | Oil on linen | 2019



Bright Day, Interior
39.5 x 47 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



Spring Blossoms
31.5 x 25.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



Wildflowers, Storm
43.5 x 59 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



Golf
39.5 x 55 inches | Oil on linen | 2022



Girl, Morning
35.5 x 27.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2020



Gibson, Moonrise
39.5 x 63 inches | Oil on linen | 2020



Poppies, Chamomile
39.5 x 31.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



Fresh Apricots
43.5 x 59 inches | Oil on linen | 2020



Roses
23.5 x 19.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2020



Girl, Dog, Early Summer
55 x 79 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



Poppies, Blue and White
23.5 x 19.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



Amy Walking, Window
47 x 39.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2022



California Girl
53.5 x 39.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



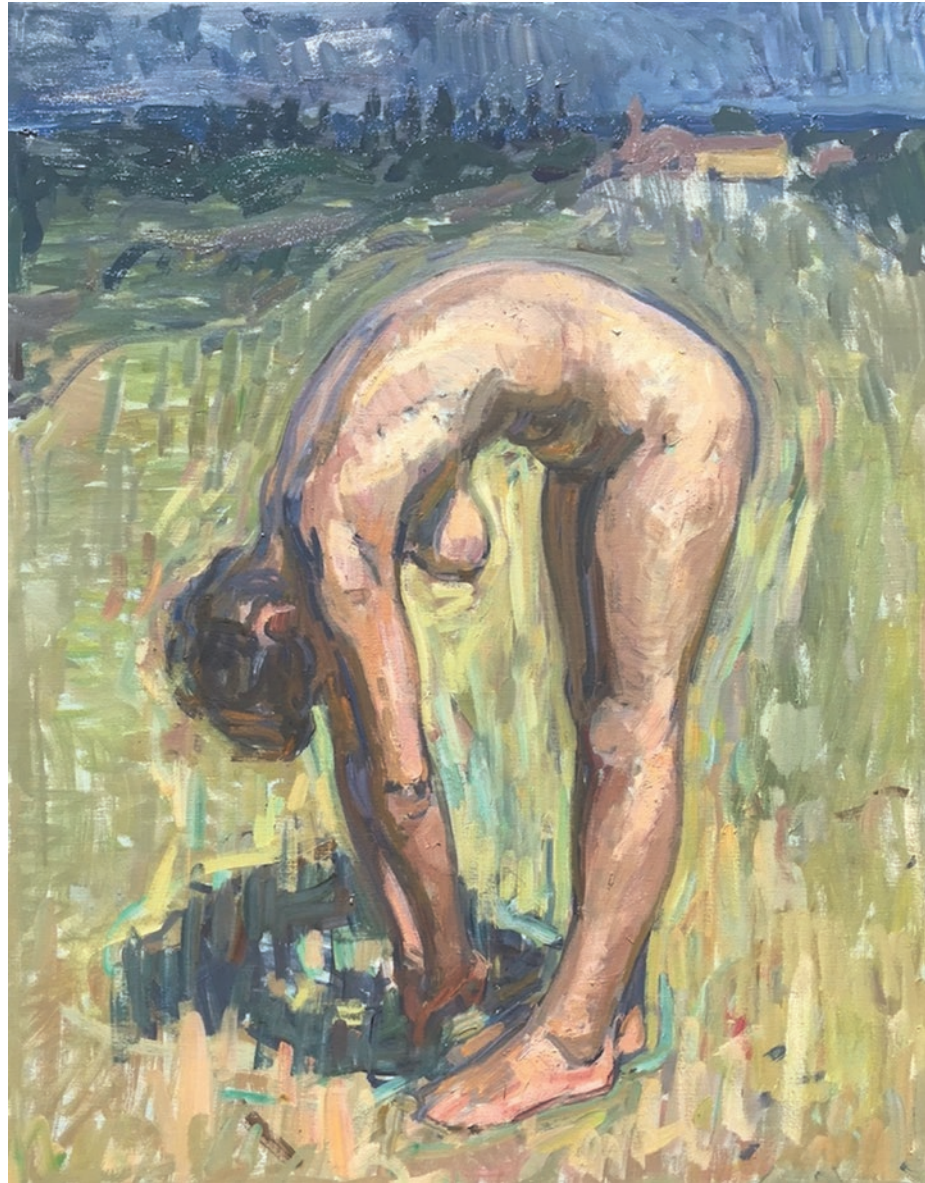
Sturgeon Moon
47 x 71 inches | Oil on canvas | 2020



Zinnias
28 x 22 inches | Oil on linen | 2020



Secret Beach, Pink Clouds
47 x 59 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



Stretching Nude, Storm, and Church
35.5 x 27.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



Open Window, June
47 x 39.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2021



Parked Panda
27 x 35 inches | Oil on linen | 2019



Lilacs, Coffee, Wine
43.5 x 59 inches | Oil on linen | 2023



September Still Life
27.5 x 35.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2020

Ben Fenske | 1978 | Minnesota

Ben Fenske (b.1978, Minnesota) has been living and working in Italy's Toscana region since 2005. He returns to Sag Harbor each year to paint and attend his annual Solo Show with Grenning Gallery. An oil painter in the spirit of 19th and 20th century Impressionists, he often chooses informal and contemporary scenes with an implied narrative. His work, which features brash and suggestive brushstrokes, delights in light and color. An artist without a designated studio space, Fenske works wherever he finds himself. Whether it be inside various rooms of his home or outside amongst the olive groves and hillsides of Tuscany, or along the sandy shores of the East End of Long Island. Fenske invites the viewer into his life with each painting.

Artist Exhibitions

2007 - 2023 Annually: Solo Show, Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor, NY

2020 Fenske and Friends, Group show, Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor, NY

2019 Corpo a Corpo, Bardini Museum, Florence, Italy

2016 - 2018 The Russian American Painting Alliance, Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor, NY

2017 Dalessio | Fenske | Personett, Gallery Schloss, Hallein, Austria

2016 BP Portrait Award Exhibition, National Portrait Gallery, London UK & Usher Gallery, Lincoln UK

2014 Solo Show, Grenning Gallery @ The Union League Club, NYC

2013 "Green Noise" Group Show, Open Air Invitational at Plyos Museum, Ivanovo Region of Russia, Sponsored by The Russian Ministry of Culture

2012 Catalina: The Wild Side Art Show and Sale

2011 Christies Auction House, March & September, NYC

2005 - 2011 Annually: The Florence Academy of Fine Art, Alumni Exhibition

2006 Group Show, Eleanor Ettinger Gallery, NYC

2006 Group Show, Ann Long Fine Art, Charleston, SC

Publications

American Art Collector, A Colorful World, Sept 2019

American Art Collector, Personal Connections, Oct 2016

Fine Art Connoisseur, A Russian Alliance Worth Your Attention, Nov 2016

Fine Art Connoisseur, Colorful Curves, Aug 2015

American Art Collector, A Fluid Collection, Nov 2013

Fine Art Connoisseur, Bottled Magic, Aug 2013

American Art Collector, Inside Out, Aug 2013

American Artist, Best 25 Living Artists, Sept 2012

American Artist, 12 Artists to Watch, Dec 2011

American Artist, The Interiors and Figurative Work of Ben Fenske: A Critical Look at Raw Talent, Dec 2010, Dan's Papers, The Sag Harbor Express, Hamptons Art Hub, Shelter Island Reporter, Southampton Press, East Hampton Star: Various Articles 2007-2023

Awards

BP Portrait Award 2016 Exhibited Artist

Education

Russian Academy of Art
Florence Academy of Art
Studio of Joseph Paquet, Minnesota
Bougie Studio, Minnesota



Sunflowers

29.5 x 23.5 inches | Oil on linen | 2022



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